

PRELIMINARY SUMMARY OF INFORMATION

Submitted to the Commission on Chicago Landmarks in December 2000

GARFIELD BOULEVARD “L” STATION AND OVERPASS **319 E. GARFIELD BLVD. (ALSO KNOWN AS 55TH STREET)**

DATE: 1892
ARCHITECT: MYRON CHURCH

The Garfield Boulevard “L” Station, part of Chicago’s original “Alley L” (now part of the Green Line), is one of the oldest intact elevated stations in the country. Subway systems already served mass transit needs in several eastern cities, but by the late 1800s elevated rail travel had emerged as the preferred form of rapid transit. Early elevated stations in New York City and Boston have either been demolished or are no longer in operation. Chicago’s other original Alley L stations have also been demolished or totally remodeled. The Garfield Boulevard “L” Station and its accompanying ornamental steel overpass have provided an impressive gateway to the Washington Park community for over a century.

HISTORY AND DESCRIPTION

Chicago’s elevated rail system debuted in 1892, making the city just the third in the nation to boast such an operation, besides New York City and Brooklyn. Although elevated rail travel is now synonymous with Chicago’s famous Loop elevated, that structure was preceded by an elevated line that was built to serve the city’s South Side residents, running from Congress Parkway to 39th Street above the alley between State Street and Wabash Avenue. The Chicago and South Side Rapid Transit Company’s new elevated line was popularly known as the Alley L.

Within months of the opening of the Alley L, the operators decided to extend service to Jackson Park in order to allow city residents and visitors easy access to the site of the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition. The first seven extension stations were approved for construction above the alleys paralleling Indiana Avenue from 40th through 63rd Streets.

Construction on the Garfield Boulevard/55th Street Station began in May 1892 as part of the World’s Fair extension. The station opened its doors to riders on October 1, 1892, seven months before the start of the fair. The station house consisted of one large room with an attendant’s booth, a newsstand, and a concession booth. A gatekeeper allowed passengers entry through the rear doors leading to the elevated platform.

Architect Myron H. Church (1852-1930) designed the seven new stations in the Arts and Crafts style with stone foundations, walls of pressed brick and terra cotta, and exposed beams and rafters. Like the others for the extension, the Garfield Boulevard station is a one-story brick building with a prominent bow front flanked by pairs of doors. It is finely detailed with both smooth and rough-textured brick, rows of Classical-style brick moldings, and a pressed-metal cornice with Classical-style acanthus leaves. Especially noteworthy, although currently obscured by paint, is the decorative brickwork running along the top of the east, north, and west elevations featuring a two-colored diamond pattern.

The station is located on the south side of Garfield Boulevard, which is divided into two roadways on either side of a broad central parkway. Garfield Boulevard is part of Chicago's famed boulevard system that was developed largely during 1869-70. The prominence of Garfield Boulevard compelled a sensitive design treatment for the track work crossing it. The engineers responded with a graceful structure made up of a series of girders with shallow-pitched, pointed arches. The structure is supported by boxed steel columns that elegantly taper from top to bottom. This ornamental treatment was only reserved for such prominent street crossings.

Architect Church's design ability can be seen in other Chicago buildings. A South Side manufacturing building at 1853-61 S. Normal Ave. (1907) was designed in the Classical style. An example of his residential work can be found in a Classical-style lakefront house at 6219 N. Sheridan Rd. (1909) in the Edgewater community.

The success of the Alley L inspired four additions to the (Green) line in 1907-08, serving the Englewood, Normal Park, Kenwood, and Stock Yards communities. Only the Englewood Branch (now known as the Green Line's Ashland Branch) remains in operation, although it has been shortened in length.

All of the other original Alley L stations have either been demolished or substantially altered. The Jackson Park terminus of the line was demolished soon after the close of the fair. During the construction of the four branches in 1907-08, the ten original stations north of 39th Street were destroyed in order to expand the line to three tracks. Over the next 80 years, most of the other twelve remaining stations south of 39th Street were either substantially altered or completely rebuilt. As a result, the Garfield Boulevard "L" Station is the oldest remaining intact station from Chicago's original elevated line.

CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION

According to the Municipal Code of Chicago (Sect. 2-120-620 and -630), the Commission on Chicago Landmarks has the authority to make a preliminary recommendation of landmark designation for a building, structure, or district if the Commission determines that it meets two or more of the stated "criteria for landmark designation," as well as possesses a significant degree of its historic design integrity.

The following should be considered by the Commission in determining whether to recommend that the Garfield Boulevard "L" Station and Overpass be designated a Chicago Landmark.

CRITERION 1: IMPORTANT PART OF THE CITY'S HISTORY

Its value as an example of the architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social or other aspect of the heritage of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois, or the United States.

- The Garfield Boulevard “L” Station, which opened in 1892, is one of the oldest surviving mass transit stations in the United States. Early elevated rail stations in New York City and Boston have been destroyed or are no longer in use.
- The station and its accompanying ornamental steel overpass spanning Garfield Boulevard represent a rare example of graceful transit design that was intended to relate to the city’s famed park boulevard system, laid out in 1869.
- The station and overpass are among the oldest surviving structures related to the city’s famed elevated system, whose first extension was built to serve visitors to the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in nearby Jackson Park. All of the city’s other original “L” stations have been demolished or severely altered.

CRITERION 4: IMPORTANT ARCHITECTURE

Its exemplification of an architectural type or style distinguished by innovation, rarity, uniqueness, or overall quality of design, detail, materials, or craftsmanship.

- The Garfield Boulevard “L” Station is the last surviving example of the city’s original “bow-fronted,” Arts-and-Crafts-styled, street-level elevated stations, which were designed in 1892.
- Together with the adjacent ornamental steel overpass spanning Garfield Boulevard, the station forms a distinctive gateway to the Washington Park community and is distinctive among the original Alley L stations. While most of the elevated structure and tracks along the line were designed in a utilitarian manner with little ornamentation, the steel overpass carrying the tracks across Garfield Boulevard has finer decorative features, intended to complement the design of the boulevard.
- The station exhibits fine detailing and craftsmanship through its use of materials. Rough-textured and smooth brick in two colors forms a “diamond” pattern across the top of the station facade, although currently obscured by paint. Rough-textured brick also ornaments the base of the station’s bow-front, while exposed wooden beams support its wide over-hanging roof. Decorative brick forms rows of Classical-style moldings beneath a pressed-metal cornice ornamented with Classical-style acanthus leaves.

INTEGRITY CRITERION

The integrity of the proposed landmark must be preserved in light of its location, design, setting, materials, workmanship and ability to express its historic community, architectural or aesthetic interest or value.

The Garfield Boulevard “L” Station retains a high level of integrity. Minimal changes have been made to the exterior of the structure. The station has retained its decorative brick walls and bow-front, which includes a projecting roof with exposed rafters. Some elements have been obscured by paint. (The interior has been greatly remodeled and appears to have no historic finishes or trim.) The ornamental steel overpass, which stretches north from the station, is currently painted white, but its decorative features, including its gently pointed arches and tapered columns, remain. Unfortunately, the overpass’ role as a gateway to the Washington Park community is greatly diminished by two large billboards which obstruct the view from either side of the tracks.

SIGNIFICANT HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES

Whenever a building or district is under consideration for landmark designation, the Commission on Chicago Landmarks is required to identify the “significant historical and architectural features” of the property. This is done to enable the owners and the public to understand which elements are considered most important to preserve the historical and architectural character of the proposed landmark.

Based on its preliminary evaluation of the Garfield Boulevard “L” Station and Overpass, the Commission staff recommends that the significant features be identified as:

- All exterior elevations of the station house, including rooflines;
- The steel overpass that supports the “L” tracks across Garfield Boulevard.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bach, Ira J. and Susan Wolfson. *A Guide to Chicago’s Train Stations: Present and Past*. Ohio University Press, 1986.

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Moffat, Bruce G. *The “L”: The Development of Chicago’s Rapid Transit System, 1888-1932*.

Bulletin 131 of the Central Electric Railfan’s Association, 1995.

Spray, John C. *The Book of Woodlawn*. John C. Spray, 1920.

Spray, John C. *Chicago’s Great South Shore*. John C. Spray, 1930.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

CITY OF CHICAGO

Richard M. Daley, Mayor

Department of Planning and Development

Christopher R. Hill, Commissioner

James Peters, Deputy Commissioner for Landmarks

Project Staff

Norah Jones, project coordinator

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Illustrations

Chicago Department of Planning and Development, Landmarks Division: pp. 6 (bot.), 9 (top), 9 (bot.)

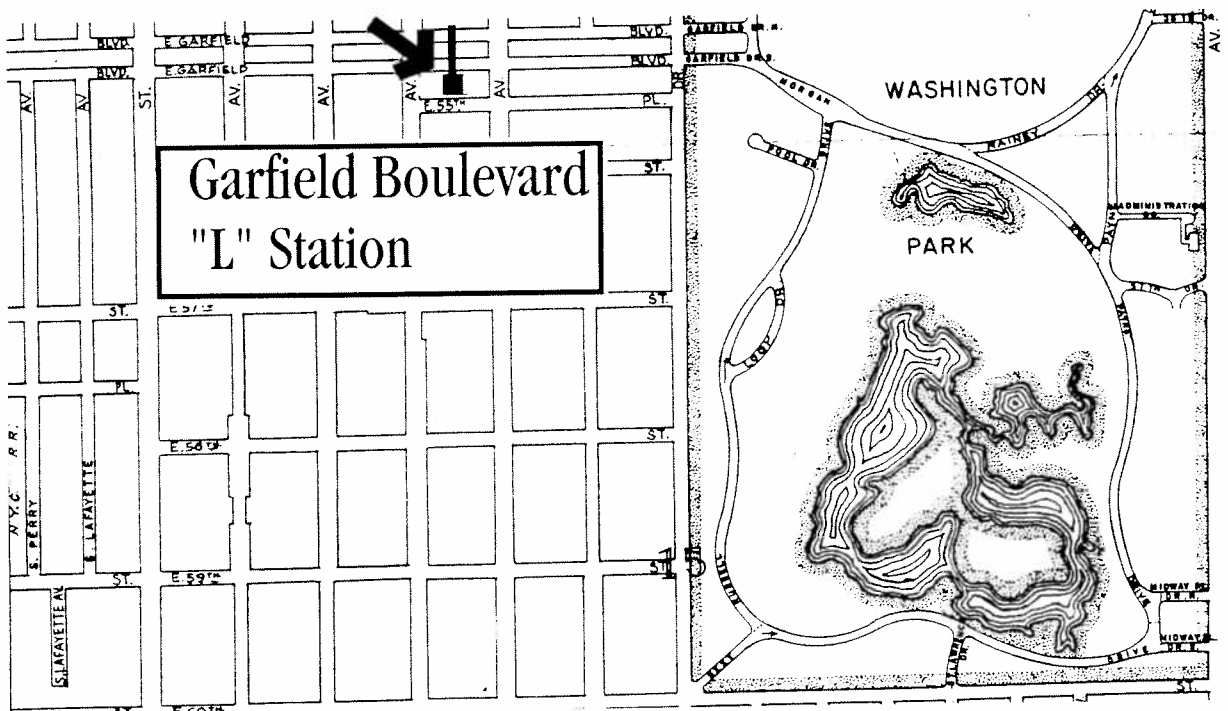
From Spray, *Chicago's Great South Shore*: p. 7 (top)

From Moffat, *The "L": The Development of Chicago's Rapid Transit System*: pp. 7 (bot.), 8 (bot.)

Bruce Moffat: p. 8 (top)

The Commission of Chicago Landmarks, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, was established in 1968 by city ordinance. It is responsible for recommending to the City Council that individual buildings, sites, objects, or entire districts be designated as Chicago Landmarks, which protects them by law. The Commission is staffed by the Chicago Department of Planning and Development, 33 N. LaSalle St., Room 1600, Chicago, IL 60602; phone (312-744-3200); TDD (312-744-9140); Web site, <http://www.ci.chi.il.us/landmarks>.

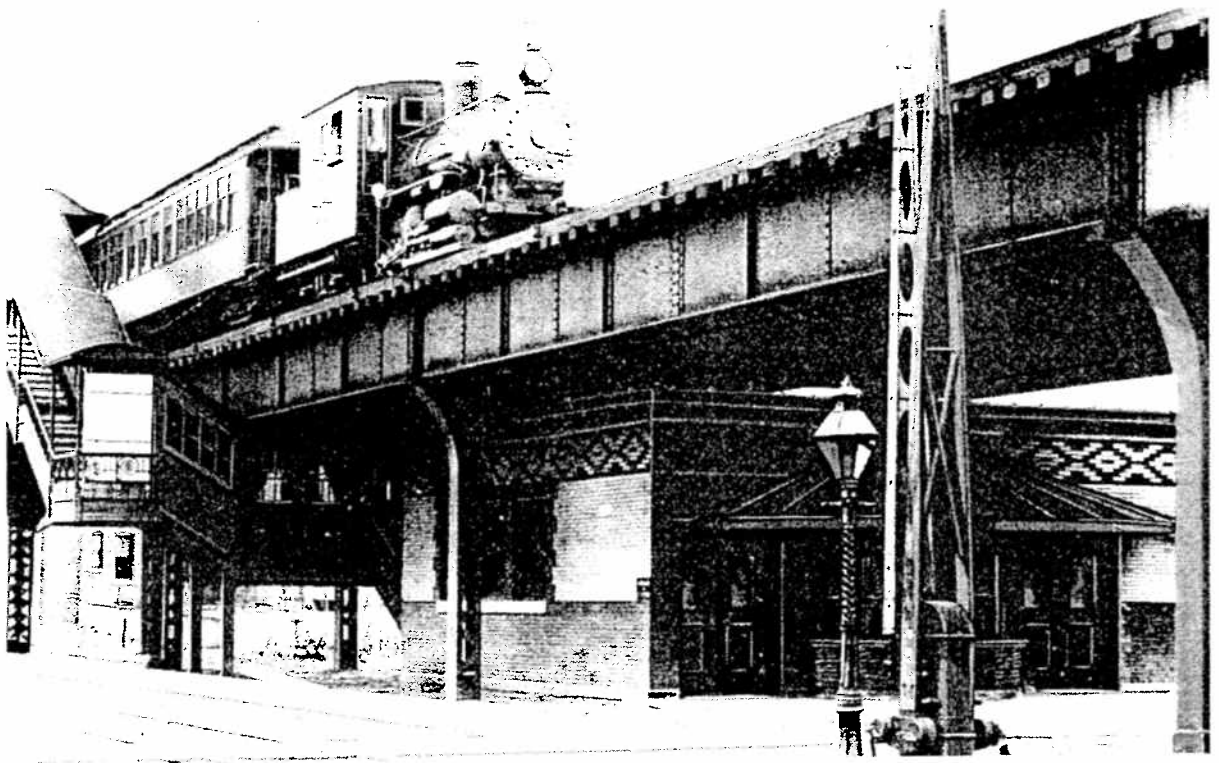
This Preliminary Summary of Information is subject to possible revision and amendment during the designation proceedings. Only language contained within the Commission's final recommendation to City Council should be regarded as final.



The Garfield Boulevard “L” Station and its decorative steel overpass are located just west of Washington Park.

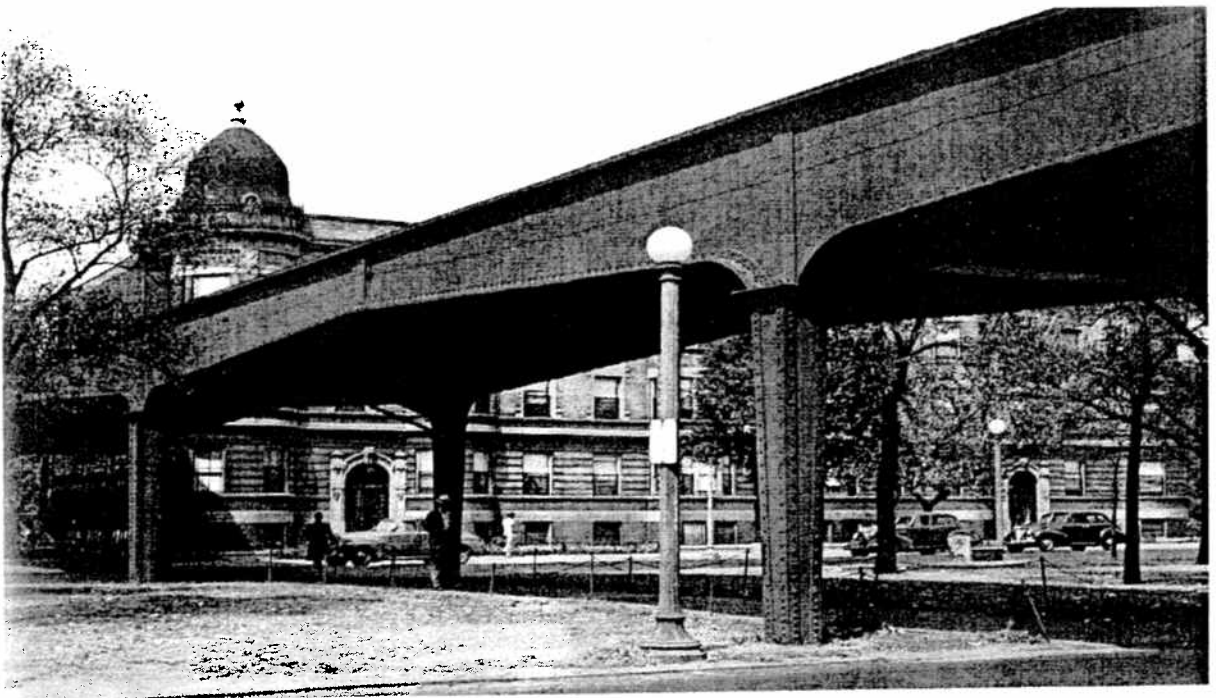


Framed by the overpass’ powerful-looking steel columns, the station house is both domestic in scale and finely detailed. Although covered with white paint, the facade still features decorative brick patterning and an ornamental cornice.



During its first year of operation, steam trains running along the "Alley L" (above) brought thousands of visitors to the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Jackson Park (bottom). The original brick pattern of the original "L" stations is visible at lower right in the top photo.

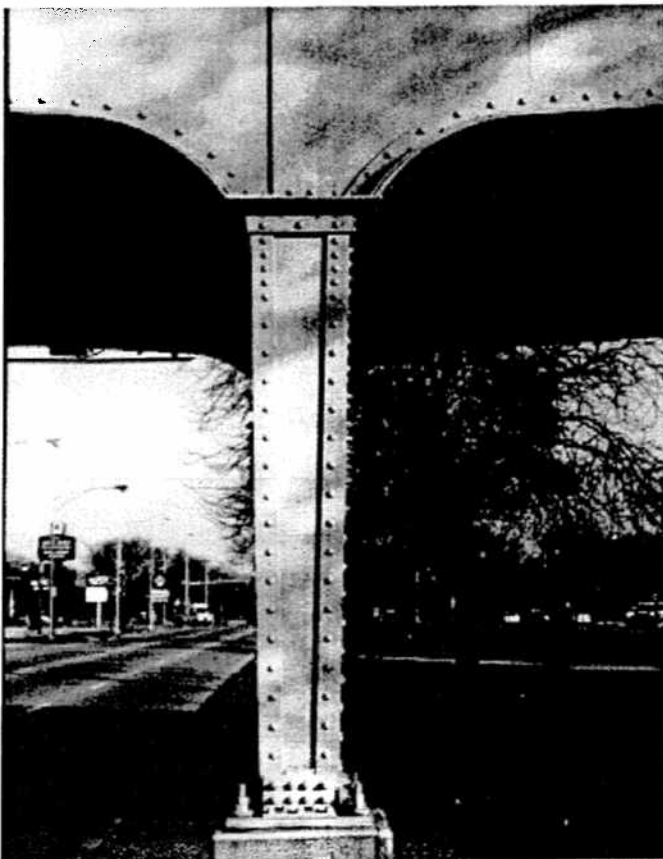




Historic photographs of the station house (top) and the overpass (above) reveal their appearance in the 1940s. Apart from the paint colors, both structures are largely intact.



New platforms for the Green Line currently are under construction on the north side of the boulevard (top), opposite the "L" station.



The overpass retains its original detailing, including the decoratively tapered columns and decorative riveting (left).

